Errata

New Realities of the American Family
Population Bulletin, vol. 47, no. 2 (August 1992)

In Figure 13, page 37, the labels for high and low relative income were reversed. The lightest shade of green represents the percentage of the population with high relative income (more than twice the median income) and the darkest shade represents those with low relative income (less than half the median income).

likely as whites to have low relative incomes, but three times less likely to be in the high income tier. Roughly 40 percent of African-Americans and Hispanics fell on the bottom rung of the relative income ladder, while only about 5 percent had made it to the top.

For young children (under age 6) not living in a married-couple family, the likelihood of having a low relative income was extremely high, regardless of race or ethnicity. In 1989, 66 percent of young white children and 80 percent of young black and Hispanic children in single-parent families had low relative incomes. Although living in a married-couple family generally improves the chances of having higher relative income, many young children in married-couple homes are in the lowest income tier: two in ten white children, three in ten black children, and four in ten Hispanic children. If the future lies in our children, then these income disparities indicate an uphill climb for many of our nation's youth.

Demographic factors suggest a slower pace of change in family patterns during the 1990s.

Outlook for the American Family

The American family is like a patchwork quilt—composed of many patterns yet durable and enduring even when it becomes frayed around the edges. Despite the diversity and fragmentation of family patterns that have emerged over the past 40 years, most Americans continue to regard the family as a central component of their life. They may no longer live in the seemingly well-ordered family world of the 1950s, but they are struggling to understand and adapt to the new realities of family life.

Making predictions about the future course of the American family is a hazardous business. The scope and magnitude of change in our marriage, divorce, and childbearing patterns have been enormous, making a total reversal of these trends seem unlikely. Yet assuming that future change will continue at the same rapid pace witnessed over the past 20 or 30 years is also an unlikely scenario. While most people will marry and continue to regard the two-parent family as the preferred norm, considerable variation will exist, depending on social and economic conditions.

In the short run, demographic factors suggest a slower pace of change in family patterns during the 1990s. The baby-boom generation, the largest generation in U.S. history, is in the prime childbearing/childrearing ages. For the next ten years, there is likely to be little change in the overall share of families with children. But the composition of those families—whether single-parent, blended, multigenerational, or intact nuclear families—is likely to shift and change with time. Although we know that single-parent families are at greatest risk of living in disadvantaged situations, we have relatively little knowledge of the step- or blended-family model. Because divorce and remarriage rates continue to be at relatively high levels, these reconstituted families are (and will continue to be) a dominant force in the life of many children. What is more, we need to understand how these families function in regard to older relatives: will members of step-families feel the same sense of responsibility and obligation toward assisting older relatives as individuals who grew up in intact nuclear families. The answer to this question is likely to shape our public policy options and strategies.

In the long run, as we move into the 21st century, two demographic trends will strongly influence the structure of American family life. First, the aging of the population—that is, the continued growth in the size and share of the older population—will increase both the number of households without children and the number of persons who live alone. This trend may raise concern over public commitment toward school bond referenda or other public expenditures for children's programs. On the other hand, an increasing number of frail elderly who live alone will require more supportive services in an era when adult daughters hold jobs and are not as readily available as earlier generations to be caregivers. The political struggle over the allocation of scarce resources will almost inevitably be seen in terms of generational conflict and trade-offs. But a better understanding of the mutual

supports and interdependencies that extend beyond the nuclear family will be a key part of meeting this challenge.

Second, the U.S. minority population is large and growing, and this fact places a special spotlight on children in need. By the year 2000, one in three school-age children will be from a minority population, compared with about one in four today. Child poverty rates, however, are two to three times higher for minority children than for non-Hispanic whites, and minority children are at greater risk of growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. Neglecting the needs of the next generation can only undercut America's investment in its own economic future.

Valuing the family should not be confused with valuing a particular family form. Indeed, family life in the 1990s will be marked by its diversity. As blended families become the norm, the responsibilities of family members become more complex, more ambiguous, and more open to dispute. Social legislation (or "pro-family" policies) narrowly designed to reinforce only one model of the American family is likely to be shortsighted and have the unintended consequence of weakening, rather than strengthening, family ties. Recognizing the diversity of American families and addressing the complexity of their needs must lie at the heart of the policy debates on family issues.

Jaana Myllyluoma

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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss changes in family structure since the 1960s. What factors drive these changes?

2. Examine age at marriage and patterns of divorce for three generations in your family. How well do they follow the patterns found in the U.S. population as a whole? Explain.

3. Assess the implications of granting "family" status to unmarried couples?

4. Given the authors' explanations for the rise and fall of marriage rates, discuss the prospects for age at first marriage for men and women in the United States in the 1990s. Will age at first marriage continue to increase or begin to decrease?

5. Compare marriage, divorce, remarriage, and childbearing patterns among industrialized nations. Do you think that the U.S. patterns will become more (or less) like other countries in the future? Why?

6. Briefly outline the differences in family formation patterns among racial and ethnic groups in the United States. How might these differences affect future population growth?

7. Consider the "traditional" family model—father as breadwinner, mother as homemaker, two or more children. With this in mind, research family structures and the roles of family members in the United States over the past 200 years. How well does the historical U.S. family fit the "traditional" model?

8. Discuss how changes in family structure, women's labor-force participation, and marriage patterns affect the well-being of children. What other factors affect children's well-being?

9. The authors find that many African-American grandparents play an important role in rearing their grandchildren. What factors may contribute to this role?

10. If you were considering getting married, how willing would you be to marry: someone of another race? someone whose income was considerably less (or considerably more) than your own? someone who was not likely to hold a steady job?

11. How will the aging of America affect family patterns in the United States? What do you see as the major challenges? What would you recommend to meet these challenges?

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